DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 267 UD 028 772

AUTHOR Lewis, James H.; And Others
TITLE Political Culture, Voter Turnout, and the 1989 Local School Council Elections in Chicago.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; Economically Disadvantaged; Educational Change; *Elections; Elementary Secondary Education; Hispanic Americans; *Local Issues; Parent Participation; Political Campaigns; Politics of Education; School Community Relationship; School Districts; *School Restructuring; State Legislation; *Urban Schools; *Voting
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Chicago Public Schools IL; Chicago Urban League; Language Minorities; *Local Control; Political Culture; Voters; Voting Behavior

ABSTRACT

A study was done of the school reform and restructuring effort in the Chicago (Illinois) Public Schools specifically of the extent to which the legislative mandate for restructuring, new management, and constituent interests has been translated into educational policy and voter turnout in local school council elections. The study used data from a Chicago Urban League (CUL) study that performed a variety of statistical tests on election data and a joint survey by the CUL, the Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance, and the Chicago Public Schools of systemwide patterns that actually operated at individual schools. The survey was administered to at least 1 parent representative, 1 community representative, the council chairperson, and the principal of each of 30 schools. The statistical and survey evidence indicated five basic points: (1) low socioeconomic status bears heavily on the likelihood that parents will participate in school council elections; (2) racial group membership does not in itself determine willingness of parents to support school reform by voting; (3) conflict within a school can strongly mobilize voters; (4) local political culture heavily influences prospects for local school council mobilization; and (5) strong communication of candidate qualifications and election publicity is vital to voter turnout. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

CHICAGO URBAN LEAGUE
RESEARCH & PLANNING LIBRARY

ED347262

POLITICAL CULTURE, VOTER TURNOUT, AND THE 1989 LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL ELECTIONS IN CHICAGO

James H. Lewis, Chicago Urban League
Shahin Naftchi Ardebilli, Chicago Public Schools
John Q. Easton, Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance

Paper Presented to Meetings of
American Education Research Association

Chicago, Illinois, April, 1991

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
R. Fox
Chicago Urban League
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UO 028772

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Restructuring has been both the watchword and the theme of education reform for the past decade. In all likelihood it will maintain this status for several years to come. The term is used to encompass a range of supposed remedies to America's education problems, including open enrollment, the effective schools movement, as well as new approaches to school governance. Emphasis both at the legislative level and in the public perception is now on improving management structures of schools and districts and fostering new means of accountability.

The Chicago reform law passed by the Illinois General Assembly in 1988 represented the most radical large city reform system of all, vesting power over school budgets and principal selection in local school councils at each of the city's 540 schools. Councils are composed of 6 parents, 2 community members, 2 teachers, and the principal. All council members, except the principal, were elected by their constituent groups.

The local school council concept was not completely new to Chicago. The 1985 Illinois school reform package, which included a variety of measures common to other states that adopted school reform packages in the 1980s, mandated local school improvement councils for each Chicago school. However these councils had only advisory powers and were not publicly elected. In few schools did the LSICs have any significant impact on the management of education.

The purpose of the school reform act of 1988, then, was to create a powerful new implementation of the old LSIC concept by vesting strong powers in a constituent based school management system. Indeed, the authors of the Act were so successful that the Illinois Supreme Court recently found the reform mechanism in violation of the principle

of one person-one vote, largely on the grounds that the new councils possessed broad powers of government. The imbalanced voting powers of parents and community residents failed a requisite test of strict scrutiny. The creators of the school reform act clearly intended to vest new and strong powers in parents for control of the schools by granting them control of 6 of each council's 11 seats.

Clearly the potential for control of local schools by new elements, i.e. the school's parent and community constituents rather than the principal and central office now exists. But to what extent has this legislative mandate for restructuring and new management actually been carried out? To what extent has this new election system empowered the community and produced a channel for parental influence on the school? The ultimate answer to these questions may lie in close analysis of decision-making processes in individual schools. Perhaps it finally lies in whether student performance improves. This research, however, focuses on the first step in translating constituent interests into educational policy, voter turnout in the local school council elections.

The research reported here stems from two major sources. Initially, the Chicago Urban League performed a variety of statistical tests on election data in order to identify major trends in the school council elections. Then, in order to learn more about how systemwide patterns actually operated at individual schools, staff from the League, Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance, and the Chicago Public Schools undertook in-depth survey research. A survey instrument was administered either in person or by telephone to at least one parent representative, one community representative, the council chairperson, and the principal of each of 30 schools. Based on the earlier League research, schools were selected

that represented the extreme ends of three continua: Highest and lowest turnout rates, highest and lowest numbers of total parent candidates, and broad distribution of total votes as opposed to a few leading candidates garnering most of the votes.

Local School Council Election Results

October 11 and 12 1989 were historic days in political history for perhaps never before were 5,400 public officials elected to office in a single set of elections within one municipality.

Estimation of voter turnout for the election is a matter of contention. Because the voting system was entirely new, no methodology existed for measuring the exact number of qualified voters. Estimates ranged from around 22% reported by the Chicago Urban League to as much as 40% of parents. Such variation in estimate is possible because whereas the number of total ballots cast was known, the number of eligible voters is not. All parents of children enrolled in the Chicago public schools were eligible to vote; however, no single listing of these parents by schools exists. School enrollment files include only the name of a single guardian per child. Thousands of children could have more than two eligible parents because of divorce and re-marriage. Both parents of children in separated families were legally eligible to vote, although one parent may not even live in Chicago.

Community turnout was much more easily measured and was clearly far lower. Approximately 2% of all Chicago adults voted in community elections, clearly an extremely low turnout by any measure.

According to estimates by the Chicago Urban League, about 5% of parent elections had turnouts of over 50%. Half of all elementary parent elections had parent turnouts ranging

from 20% to 33%. Twenty-three percent of all parent elections had parent turnouts of 19% or less.

Turnout rates are highly predictable in terms of types of schools and their racial/ethnic composition. A multiple regression analysis accounted for 44% of the total variance in turnout between elementary school elections and 60% in high school elections.

The most important predictor of turnout, accounting for 32% of the entire variance across elementary schools, is the achievement level of the school. The percent of students who scored above the national average on ITBS reading tests correlated at a Pearson .56 with parent turnout. The 97 schools with at least half of students above national median levels for reading averaged 39% turnout. Schools with fewer than half of students at median reading levels averaged only 25% turnout.

The next most important predictor of parent turnout was whether a school was a magnet school. Magnet schools averaged 51% turnout while selective scholastic academies averaged 37% turnout. Other desegregated school types averaged 31%. The lowest turnout rates occurred in racially identifiable schools, which are almost entirely black or Hispanic.

Both the percentage of students in a school who were black and who were white corresponded to different turnout levels. However, because racial characteristics of a school are so highly correlated with achievement and school type, race alone does not explain turnout levels. White students are disproportionately represented in magnet schools and most racially identifiable schools are predominantly black. Schools with higher academic performance also tend to have higher white enrollments.

The presence of large numbers of white students corresponded to high turnout levels

while schools with the largest black populations had low turnouts. Schools over half black averaged turnouts of 25% while schools over half white averaged 33% turnout.

Although its bivariate correlation with turnout was very low, the Hispanic composition of a school does help predict turnout in combination with the other variables, . Percent of students Hispanic only correlated at .11 with high elementary turnout; however, this small correlation was somewhat higher when school type and achievement level were accounted for.

Although the bivariate correlation of school percent of students from low income families to turnout level was strong, income level was relatively unimportant to the multiple regression analysis, primarily because the percent of poverty level students in the school co-varies so strongly with reading scores and the school type.

Turnout was also moderately related to the size of the school and the number of candidates. The larger schools had lower turnout rates. Although data points to no definitive explanation, it could be attributable to the existence of a relatively fixed size of core leadership of a school which made up the heart of the parent voters in these relatively low turnout elections. Publicity for the election may have been more focused and effective in smaller schools, with more possibility for face-to-face communication of the principal and teachers with a higher percentage of parents.

A moderate correlation also existed between the number of candidates in the race and voter turnout. While no relationship of this sort exists in conventional political races, its presence in the Chicago council elections is not surprising. The vast majority of evidence assembled from the election suggests that little was known about most of the candidates and

that few issues were sufficiently salient or controversial to draw voters out to vote. Oral interviews suggest that the single most common reason that one candidate received a vote was the voters personal acquaintance with the candidate. Many elections were publicized largely by "word of mouth."

Survey research uncovered few elections with slates of candidates espousing identifiable positions or identities running against one another. No identifiable political affiliation of candidates emerged from the election process, with the possible exception of ones racial/ethnic identity, or whether one was for or against retaining the principal. Few if any candidates appear to have been linked to any issues involving substantial amounts of money. Local school councils have no direct powers of taxation, so the single issue that most often enlivens conventional elections was absent.

The pattern of vote distribution among candidates suggests this as well. Most elections were characterized by the top two of the six candidates receiving strong support but the next four winners receiving support little different from the top two or three losing candidates.

Differences Between High and Low Turnout Schools

From the statistical and survey evidence several paradigms of schools emerge which closely define where parents chose to participate in elections and where they did not.

Schools with high turnout appeared to fit into one of three categories: they were 1) magnet schools, 2) schools where voters were highly mobilized by conflict, or 3) schools in communities with a strong tradition of political mobilization.

The low turnout schools are defined by 1) being poor and highly segregated black, or

2) by having significant language problems impeded voters, which are predominantly Hispanic.

South Elementary is located in the heart of one of the poorest communities in the nation. Its 100% black student population is drawn from the Robert Taylor public housing complex and is entirely low income. South Elementary students annually test among the lowest in the city. These students have extremely young parents, most of whom never finished school themselves. Many appear apathetic and unaccustomed to meaningful institutional participation.

That all four subjects interviewed about the election at South School remarked that the turnout was good, even though it was among the lowest in the city, perhaps speaks to the dismal expectations that pervade many impoverished schools and communities. Registration and turnout among blacks was highest in Chicago for the two runs for mayor by Harold Washington. Since his death, black political participation at all levels has suffered. Although the election appears to have been adequately publicized, extraordinary efforts probably would have been necessary to produce a strong turnout at South School. This was a pattern that was replicated in approximately 150 poor black schools across Chicago with turnouts beneath 33%.

Turnout rate was low at North School for other reasons. Located in Humboldt Park, a Hispanic/Puerto Rican community, North School is half black and half Hispanic. North School has an annual student turnover of 50%, extremely poor children, and very low test scores. At North School, no single issue was perceived at the time as having been of singular importance to parents; rather, a panoply of "urban" problems was cited by subjects

as issues such as crime, low student performance, and an inadequate building. The inability to focus on particular issues as opposed to an overall focus on urban problems probably leads to much of the widespread perception among many that their vote won't make much difference.

Publicity at North School was clearly inadequate, as it may have been at many poor schools with significant language problems. Community organizations helped train candidates, but proved unable to stimulate high voter turnout. The combination of language difficulties with high mobility of parents and students may have resulted in little parent identification with the school and its problems.

Thus we may identify the two major types of schools with low turnouts: The poor black schools with little history of either voting or meaningful institutional participation and poor schools with multiple language problems. Most schools with extremely low turnout rates are located in parts of the city that arc also demobilized with respect to conventional politics and elections.

Schools with high turnout rates were different in important respects.

Controversy has led historically to the highest voter turnouts in conventional Chicago elections. East School on Chicago's multi-ethnic north lakefront has considerable numbers of poor students, high student mobility, and a multiplicity of languages. The East School election was highly charged with ethnic rivalry. Two subjects interviewed referred to the election as "political warfare." At issue was the future of the school's principal and access to school resources by different ethnic groups. Voters were energized by the presence of at least 3 ethnically-based slates seeking support. Given issues seen as worth contending

over, and people willing to seek organization around them, high turnout is possible even in multi-lingual, low income communities.

West School is located near Midway Airport in a neighborhood of predominantly Polish and Eastern European background. About 50% of the students at West are white students who live nearby. The balance of the student body includes black and Hispanic students transported from outside the neighborhood. West has many elements that would be expected to be consistent with high turnout. The principal noted that people in the neighborhood were already highly attuned to political participation. Indeed West School's neighborhood regularly produces the high turnouts that have historically supported Regular Democratic candidates. The local alderman's organization was involved to some extent in publicizing the local school council election. Although the tone of the election at Peck could not have been more different than at East School, one subject interviewed did note that race was an issue in parent voting. Subjects noted the high quality of candidates who ran and the tradition of West School as a cultural center of their local community. Peck is part of a strongly bounded community, accustomed to participating as a group in politically-oriented events, highly activated, and interested in improving, or defending, a school with which they have identified over decades.

Central School represents the third and final high turnout type, the magnet school. Although 78% black and with students travelling significant distances to attend, the academically selective classical school turned out high numbers of voters. This did not surprise anyone as subjects noted that the reform concept was not new to Central School as they had always practiced parent involvement. Special efforts were made at Central to

assure attendance at the candidates' forum and to publicize the election. Magnet schools are often characterized both by a high level of school-parent communication, and by high parent interest in the educational process. Although most magnet school students have to travel distances to school, and their parents must do the same to vote, distance was clearly not a problem in magnet schools. As one subject explained, people will find ways to get to things that are important to them.

If restructuring of schools means focusing on interactions that take place within the school - power relationships between teachers, principals, and local school council members -- then the Chicago schools have undergone a thorough restructuring. If, however, restructuring in the Chicago context is understood to mean responsiveness of the school administration to deep seated parent interests, or participation in leadership on the part of individual parents who may or may not actually be on the councils, then some schools in Chicago clearly have "constituent management" while others still do not.

In magnet schools, schools with clearly defined and contended issues, and schools in neighborhoods with strong traditions of political mobilization, the election process appears to have effectively channeled broad community and parent interests into policymaking. In some of these schools, most likely where one or more ethnic groups failed to gain council seats, substantial and legitimate issues may not be represented on the council. Whether councils that effectively derive from one of several school constituencies can govern effectively remains to be seen. Local Chicago politics have often been racially defined and perceived as being of "winner take all" nature. This tendency virtually immobilized the Chicago City Council from 1983 through 1986. High election turnouts do not inherently

make good government.

In most low income black schools, and in many schools with multi-lingual populations, extremely low election turnout combined with lack of knowledge about candidates and issues means that the elected council representatives may or may not adequately represent the school's constituents. In this half of Chicago schools, the election process did not serve to mobilize constituent interest in the schools. Although the black community is permeated by ward organizations and religious groups which organized and mobilized support for the Washington mayoral campaigns, these organizations did not mobilize support for local school council candidates in black communities. Black schools did generate relatively large numbers of candidates for seats, but those candidates may have emerged because of perceptions among black community activists that black control of local schools had been endangered by the school reform process. This fear gained credibility in the black community with the highly visible defense of superintendent Manford Byrd by Jesse Jackson and PUSH.

In many black neighborhoods, however, the concern for defense of local schools did not extend to choosing which among the wide variety of black candidates generated from that community could best manage the schools. The school reform plan with its overt destruction of the power of the central office was not embraced by much of the mainstream black community leadership as a solution to educational problems. On school council election day, therefore, a minority of black parents felt any need to support the school reform process by voting.

From this we can conclude five basic points:

1. Low socio-economic status bears heavily on the likelihood that parents will participate in school council elections it often coexists with apathy, discouragement, and lack positive experience of influence with institutions.

2. Racial group membership does not in itself determine willingness of parents to support school reform by voting.

3. Conflict within a school can be a strong mobilizer of voters.

4. Local political culture bears heavily on prospects for local school council mobilization. Activism in conventional elections transfers to local school council elections.

5. Strong communication of candidate qualifications and election publicity is vital to turnout, but is hard to impose from outside of locally based community and school networks.

High voter turnout in council elections is desirable for successful implementation of the Chicago school reform model. This study has shown that the presence of clearly identifiable issues that people understand, having an adequate number of candidates who are knowledgeable and respected by the public, and the presence of indigenous organizations and networks with the school community all strongly facilitate high voter turnout.